

Guild's 100th Anniversary: Debra Lapthorne, Director of Public Health

The importance of the voluntary and community sector to the health of the city and the Guild's role in this over the years from a PCT perspective.

I am very pleased to be asked to talk about the vital role that the Guild has played in the life of the city over the last 100 years. This is a real opportunity to celebrate and to acknowledge the contribution made by the Guild as an organisation and all of the individuals who have passed through its doors in that time.

Whenever a senior appointment is made in the statutory sector their induction always includes meeting with the Guild Director to help the new person understand Plymouth, because the story of the Guild is the story of Plymouth itself. As we know, Plymouth is a city that has arisen from the ashes, literally after the blitz, and the Guild has itself changed, grown and developed as the city has.

The Plymouth Civic Guild of Help was set up in 1907 to "study town conditions in Plymouth with a view to reforming existing evils and increasing the amenities of the lives of poor". The social and economic conditions in Plymouth at the time of the formation of the Guild were appalling with large numbers of unemployed and poor families living in workhouses or on the dole. Some of the workhouse buildings still stand in the city today.

In its formative years, the Guild was concerned with assisting the unemployed and poor people who needed help. Volunteers from the Guild found food, clothing and shelter for unemployed families, helped families reunite with men who were forced to leave the city to find work and ensured that individuals who needed medical care, 41 years before the start of the NHS, received it. The Guild also persuaded many others to provide advice and support for families in need.

The Guild looked after the children from broken homes, individuals with disabilities, the elderly and infirm, families living in slum conditions and overcrowded housing and provided support to so many women who lost their husbands as a result of the two world wars. This was the very beginning of what we would now recognise as the welfare state in Plymouth, the beginnings of a social service that could fill the gaps left by the State and provide flexible and responsive services, an approach that continues to this day.

Since its inception the Guild has had two clear and distinct roles. Firstly to provide an umbrella body for the voluntary organisations in the city and secondly to respond to new social needs that either the statutory sector is not able to provide for or is not best placed to do so.

To be an umbrella organisation is not an easy place to be. Some will criticize and think they can do it better but don't step forward, others recognise that the very act of debating the issues around leadership within a sector means that the individual components of the sector are becoming stronger. Some people might think that the Guild has become part of the establishment but this is not the case, in fact, the Guild is **established** and has helped several other organisations and services to become established rather than being part of the establishment.

A good leader, in politics or business, knows that he or she cannot do everything oneself, but can facilitate, set the tone and context, inspire others: then the people accomplish great things and believe, with some justification, that they have done it themselves. This role for the Guild of helping to establish, means that the Guild has been instrumental in setting up several organisations in Plymouth that we probably all think have always been there, organisations like Age Concern, the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the Refuge, Shop-mobility and the home help service amongst many others.

The second role of the Guild, in seeing where the gaps are and setting up new services is a key strength of the Voluntary and Community Sectors, the ability to be nimble and flexible and get on with doing what is needed whilst the statutory sector thinks about, it is just what we need. The Guild have long been Public Health champions in the city and played a vital role in helping to secure Health Action Zone status for Plymouth in 1999 with its resultant improvement in health, that has lifted Plymouth well out of the worst 100 areas in the country for health inequalities.

When the Guild was first set up, the care of the sick and infirm was the responsibility of the 'Guardians of the Poor' who were directly elected by the rate payers. In 1907 the average wages for people in employment were about 30 shillings weekly, poor relief payments were between 3 and 4 shillings for older people, 6 shillings for married men and a shilling for each child, half in cash and half in kind. Applicants had to collect bread from the relief station and officers weighed the bread before handing it out.

The case records from the early days of the Guild make both fascinating and appalling reading, revealing the depths of poverty and deprivation in Plymouth. Many of the records describe the large numbers of people with consumption (TB) whose health was worsened by poor living conditions and lack of care. The Guild stepped in and provided practical help including bedding, adapted chairs and medical support; lobbying the council for suitable accommodation and developing the Didworthy Dispensary in Frankforth Street to provide treatment.

The Guild worked very closely with the City Council to provide support to those who needed it most and this relationship continues to this day.

The Guild also understands that in order to survive to this great age it has needed to constantly change and adapt. The Guild has survived and thrived because it understands that it should only do the things that only it can do. The services that the Guild provide now are very different from those of ten years ago, let alone 100.

The Guild has always been able to spot the changes that are coming and to understand what this means for their core business. In the commercial sector world, organisations can destroy themselves by chasing the wrong things, pursuing turnover rather than profit, chasing the latest 'new thing' or source of income rather than focusing on core business and this can also be true for the voluntary and community sectors too.

The Guild has always managed to change and grow in a way that is right for the Guild and also more importantly right for the people of Plymouth. The core of the Guild's business is its volunteers and the Volunteer Centre.

Volunteering is important in society as it has considerable benefit. People's motivation for volunteering varies dramatically, probably as a consequence of the diverse volunteer population. For some it is a way of giving new focus to their lives post retirement or developing employment based skills, some want to repay care given to them or a loved one in the past. Helping others through volunteering has provided a platform for them to do this. Studies suggest that the benefit to the organisation or service of volunteering is returned ten fold and many of the services provided by volunteers would cease to exist if the volunteers weren't there.

The volunteers themselves benefit tremendously from their roles. Volunteering makes them feel better about themselves, and heightens their awareness of other people's feelings. They report that volunteering has increased their sense of making a useful contribution. This is in part of a consequence of their feeling valued by the organisation they are volunteering for and the people they are working with.

For many, volunteering has increased their self – confidence. This can lead to employment opportunities. Other volunteers report an improvement in physical and mental health. In so many ways the Guild's role in developing and strengthening opportunities for Volunteering is an indication of the contribution it makes to life in Plymouth.

The Guild helps us all to focus on what we do best as we know the Guild is there to do the things we can't or shouldn't be doing. The Guild has helped to plug the gaps and to develop new services that are still thriving independently today. The Guild because of its longevity, has seen it all before and is patient enough to let us find our feet again every time we change direction in the statutory sector idea and does it with such grace that we feel as though the relationship continues to be in balance. The Guild also is an organisation we can trust and depend on for support.

However it is very important to remind ourselves that like a person who has survived for 100 years and lived through much change, we should not assume to think that we know best or that we can impose our ideas about what is best on something or someone who has done very well without out interference so far. We also need to remember that old people survive best when their families and friends invest time and resource in them.

If we want to be sure that the Guild will be around in another 100 years, meeting the needs of the people of Plymouth, then we must recognise collectively the roles we have in ensuring its survival and we should cherish the Guild now and value its contribution and look forward to our successors celebrating its 200th anniversary.